

**Testimony of  
Robert L. Krepps  
Land Commissioner, St Louis County, Minnesota  
Before the  
Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, Subcommittee on Forestry,  
Conservation, and Rural Revitalization  
August 2, 2006**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, I'm pleased to provide testimony today on the important topic of forest recovery and reforestation and specifically, the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act (HR 4200). My name is Bob Krepps, and I currently serve as the land commissioner for St. Louis County, Minnesota, managing 890,000 acres of county land, including 2,370 acres within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in the Superior National Forest. I recently moved to Minnesota, having previously served as the State Forester of Missouri for six years. I have been engaged as a professional forester at the federal, state, and now county level for 39 years.

Today I am here to relay a need for action-- action on the nation's federal lands after catastrophes, where currently very little occurs. I'm not here to say that we need to do something on every acre after catastrophes, but if the professional forest managers in the field, after public involvement and environmental analysis, think some recovery actions are necessary, they should have the processes and legal support to act quickly. As I'm sure many of you have heard in the media reports, two wildfires are currently burning within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) in northern Minnesota. These fires, started by lightening on July 14th, have burned nearly 34,000 acres at a direct cost to suppress and manage of \$7.6 million as of July 31, 2006.

This abnormal wildfire is burning in an area that was hit by another catastrophe seven years ago--a massive blow-down that resulted in fuel loads of 50-100 tons per acre up from a normal fuel load of 5-20 tons per acre. Wildfires are a natural part of Minnesota forests, as they are in other forest types throughout the country. However, the magnitude and severity of the wildfires that are burning in the Boundary Waters are far from what would be considered natural and in fact, are probably the worst we have seen in decades. Most wildfires in northeastern Minnesota are human caused with very few lightening fires occurring on an annual basis.

The July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1999 blow-down affected an estimated 477,000 acres of forests in northeastern Minnesota. The majority of the blow-down acres were federal lands on the Superior National Forest, within the BWCA wilderness, but state, county, and private lands outside the wilderness were also affected, including 7,700+ acres in St. Louis County. After the blow-down, St. Louis County acted very quickly, removing the dead and dying trees on their lands and quickly conducting

restoration and salvage treatments. This restoration and recovery effort was completed within two years of the blow-down event and included logging and restoration on 5,200 acres and generated \$399,000 for city, township and county programs that support county residents. Lake, Cook and Itasca County lands were also damaged and all three counties took very similar steps to recover and reforest their lands. Today these areas are growing into a thriving forest.

It is important to note that the St. Louis County Lands Department manages county lands “to provide optimum returns” while also aiming to assure long-term sustained yields of renewable resources and provide protection for wildlife, watersheds and provide for a diverse recreation resource. St. Louis County also dual maintains dual certification by both the Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI) and the International Standards Organization (ISO). Included in these certifications is a requirement to maintain environmental compliance with federal, state, and local laws, regulations and ordinances. We are audited annually. We go through much of the same process as our federal partners, however the process is not as lengthy and unwieldy as the federal process. Having worked at the federal, state and county levels, I would say that the level of environmental consideration as the county level is, at a minimum, equal to federal standards, and involves less process.

Following the blow down, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources also prepared a series of timber sales aimed at fuel reduction in areas outside the BWCA wilderness. These logging projects were in critical areas near private lands and areas of homes and businesses along the Gunflint Trail. These projects were planned and implemented in late 1999. In addition, state, county, and industry foresters helped private landowners find loggers to cleanup their damaged timber and provided information on long term planning and reforestation assistance.

In contrast to these actions, federal land managers, with alternative arrangements under the National Environmental Policy Act granted by the Council on Environmental Quality, treated some of the lands directly around roads and trails, outside the wilderness area. This was done relatively quickly—in 12-24 months--- although action on the adjacent non federal lands certainly took less time. The Superior National Forest developed a fuel treatment plan for the Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness to treat critical areas of the blow-down through use of prescribed fire. These prescribed fires, implemented from 2002-2005, were planned and implemented to reduce fuel loads and prevent or reduce the possibility of a wildfire spreading from the wilderness. These successful fuel treatments have helped with the suppression efforts on the Cavity Lake fire currently burning.

I’m not here to criticize the designation of the wilderness and the lack of action taken in that area—wilderness is a valid land use, when the designation is done

properly. What is most interesting about this story is the forests' response to the differing management approaches. The areas where action could be taken immediately to recover forest values and generate economic return are on the road to recovery. The areas where no action was taken remain brush fields, clearly a wildfire risk, and provide little of the recreation and other values that people go to wilderness areas to enjoy.

I know from personal experience that this problem is not specific to Minnesota's national forests or wilderness designations. Before my time in Missouri and Minnesota, I worked on the Kootenai National Forest in Montana. On August 13, 1994 the Kootenai National Forest experienced an intense dry lightening storm that swept across the forest. This storm resulted in over 200 fires which took over six weeks to suppress and control. In total more than 54,000 acres of National Forest were burned.

Within a week of when the fires started the Forest Supervisor designated a forest recovery team to begin the damage assessment, working in concert with the fire managers. This damage assessment considered direct and potential resource impacts, burn intensity, forest growth potential, rehabilitation work needed and opportunities to salvage timber that had been burned. The assessment was completed within two weeks of the fires being controlled. Recovery work was started immediately based on the assessment. Rehabilitation work began during the suppression effort and continued through the next year. Specific environmental analysis for projects began within a month after completing the initial assessment and the first salvage sales began in the spring of 1995 with most of the high priority work being completed by 1998. Unfortunately, this type of rapid action following catastrophes occurs too infrequently on federal lands today, as process hurdles and administrative delays become the norm.

It is clear to me, after witnessing these and other forest catastrophes first hand, that Congressional action is needed to better enable timely federal response. When forest managers are allowed to move forward with timely recovery and reforestation activities appropriate for the values and uses associated with the forest, the forest can be restored in a timely manner—sometimes much quicker than when left alone. Congress needs to untie federal land managers' hands from lengthy process and administrative hurdles to enable federal forest recovery. CEQ enabled this in the Superior National Forest with the granting of alternative arrangements; the *Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act (FERRA)* would accomplish similar objectives.

I strongly urge this Committee to take action on FERRA. This bill mandates the federal agencies take immediate action to assess the damage after catastrophes, similar to what was done in the Kootenai example, and then provides the necessary expedited authorities if forest managers determine action is needed. It also contains important research and cross-ownership coordination authorities. In

addition to FERRA, there are a number of other bills that have been introduced in the Senate with options for addressing this problem and I encourage you to also take these ideas into consideration as you move forward.

Congress has an opportunity to provide the support and tools for federal forest managers to better manage federal forests. It is a tragedy that management of these forests-A National Treasure, has become a quagmire of litigation, burdensome process and court driven decision making. Forest managers know what needs to be done, but are shackled in their ability to actually do the work needed. I appeal to you here in Congress to clarify the laws, streamline the process and give federal managers the tools they need to bring the National Forests back to being a NATIONAL TREASURE.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.